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ABSTRACT

Efforts by departments at the University of Arizona to prepare graduate students for teaching are described, along with a university plan for the training of graduate teaching assistants. Although most departments provide some type of training for graduate teaching assistants, training and supervision are uneven and undeveloped, except in a few cases. The time devoted to this activity ranges from 2 hours to a full academic year, including mandatory enrollment in courses focusing on teaching specific subject matter. While most departments never or rarely employ foreign students as teaching assistants, there is no university-wide evaluation of spoken English for foreign students. The university's plan requires that all graduate teaching assistants receive training before being assigned teaching responsibilities. Foreign students will be required to take the Test of Spoken English and to participate in a workshop that focuses on comprehensibility, cultural awareness, and teaching strategies. A form will also be used by departments to assess the teaching performance of teaching assistants. (SW)

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Training of Graduate Teaching Assistants: A Case Study*

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I. Introduction

In the ebb and flow of higher education, undergraduate education surfaces as a major issue every seven to ten years. During the last two years we have been riding a crest that has focused a great deal of attention on the structure and quality of undergraduate education. The debate has flourished at all levels, national, state and local. At the national level the discussion has focused on the three reports with which we are all familiar (see References). Many of us have met at regional and national conferences to criticize or offer our support for the contents of these reports. At the state level, legislatures have become involved by enacting laws and regulations that directly or indirectly affect undergraduate education, such as mandatory entry and exit testing. At the local level, most colleges and universities have started discussions dealing with various issues central to undergraduate education. For example, a recent issue of Change Magazine (Nov./Dec., 1985) reported that 65.1 percent of Research I and 56.3 of Comprehensive I universities were reviewing their approach to general education.

Since at least the academic year 1984-85, most universities have been involved in a discussion of undergraduate education, whether through internal initiative or as a result of the national attention focused on this topic. At universities with graduate programs and in particular research universities, some of the attention on undergraduate education has necessarily focused on graduate teaching assistants. It has long been common practice that colleges and universities use teaching assistants as part of the instructional staff. Although it is quite common to use teaching assistants in basic language courses and entry level mathematics, teaching assistants have come to be used

widely at universities, particularly in departments offering graduate degrees. (Teaching assistantships serve as financial support for graduate students.) Graduate students are frequently involved as part-time instructors, test graders, discussion leaders and laboratory session supervisors. In the past decade, an increasing proportion of teaching assistants have come from foreign countries; this is especially true in mathematics, physics, engineering, statistics and business.

Although there is some concern about the use of graduate students as instructors, the major issue centers around the preparation of graduate students for teaching responsibilities. The report on Integrity in the College Curriculum was rather critical of the failure of graduate programs to prepare students for teaching assignments. Following are some quotes from that report:

> "The emphasis of the graduate school years is almost exclusively on the development of substantive knowledge and research skills....
>
> During the long years of work toward the doctorate degree, the candidate is rarely, if ever, introduced to any of the ingredients that make up the art, the science, and the special responsibilities of teaching....
>
> Only in higher education is it generally assumed that teachers need no preparation, no supervision, no

introduction to teaching....

> If teaching in American higher education is to become more effective and responsible, the awarding of the Ph.D. degree should also mean that the candidate has been evaluated as a teacher and not found wanting, and that the formal experience leading to the degree has included appropriate instruction in the responsibilities of the profession."

Most of us familiar with institutions of higher education would have to agree that, generally speaking, graduate programs have tended to do very little to prepare students to become teachers. Keeping this in mind, I turn to our study.

This paper reports on how one university is dealing with the issue of graduate teaching assistants. The paper is divided into five sections. This introductory section is followed by two short sections on procedures and results. The fourth section describes a plan of action, and the paper ends with a few observations that we might term conclusions.

Before proceeding any further, I would like to note that my own assessment of the state of affairs regarding undergraduate education is not as dismal as that implied by the three reports (to which I referred above) and the discussions resulting from these reports. Although the quality and structure of undergraduate education require some of our best attention at this time, undergraduate education is not doomed to failure. On the contrary, I am most

confident that the attention we are giving to this topic will result in some of the best programs the country has ever had for undergraduate students. In short, there is no reason to panic. Our deliberations should proceed in a normal fashion, making certain to include input from faculty and students. However, faculty and administrators must take the leadership role and be willing to act decisively. To be sure, little or no action by the universities will result in greater direct input from governing boards and state legislatures, and their actions, as you know, frequently have very little academic meaning since they are primarily based on political expediency.

II. Description of Study: Methodology and Procedures

In February 1985 the Dean of the Graduate College of the University of Arizona distributed a memorandum to Deans requesting information on programs in their college aimed at preparing students in general and foreign students specifically for teaching assignments. The Deans in turn requested similar information from department heads. With the exception of one college that does not employ graduate teaching assistants, the Deans of all colleges provided descriptions of training programs for graduate teaching assistants.

This study reports on an analysis of these materials as well as others related to the training of graduate teaching assistants at the University of Arizona. Included in the other documents, for example, are the following: A report submitted to the Arizona Board of Regents by the Arizona Students' Association in May 1985, a Policy on Graduate Teaching Assistants and Associates adopted by the Arizona Board of Regents at its October 1985 meeting, an Outline of a

workshop offered by the Office of Instructional Research and Development for Teaching Assistants and Faculty, and materials describing a workshop offered by the Center for English as a Second Language for Foreign Teaching Assistants.

My approach to this study is two-fold: as a sociologist and administrator. The sociological focus is that of participant observer since I am directly involved in the assessment of the problem and in the development of a plan of action. My role as an administrator is also quite direct; at least two of the units involved in providing instruction for teaching assistants report to me.

III. Results

Contrary to popular perception, the overwhelming majority of academic units at the University of Arizona provide training programs for teaching assistants, albeit not necessarily in terms of a specific format. The variation in training programs, however, is almost as diverse as the disciplines represented at the University. Training extends from compulsory participation in workshops offered by the Office of Instructional Research and Development to training conducted entirely within the academic unit by individual faculty members. In terms of time devoted to this activity, the span is anywhere from two hours to a full academic year that includes mandatory enrollment in specific courses designed for graduate teaching assistants in that academic unit.

The variation among departments also extends to other areas related to the use of graduate teaching assistants. For example, the quality of the training programs varies a great deal. A few departments that use teaching assistants do not have training programs at all, while others are quite substantive (in fact, one program is nationally recognized for its creativity). Also, there is much variation in the use of graduate teaching assistants. One department uses them as tutors, another as advisers, some as lab assistants, others as graders, discussion leaders and of course, many employ them as teachers.

Although one cannot find a consistent pattern for training graduate teaching assistants across all academic units, several of the programs include a requirement stipulating that before a student can be assigned to teaching responsibilities, he/she has to complete a course offered by the department that focuses on teaching the specific subject matter. For example, graduate students in the College of Nursing must complete a course titled, "Teaching in Collegiate Schools of Nursing," and students in the Art Department have to complete a course titled, "Teaching Art in Higher Education." Incidentally, the discussion of training teaching assistants has prompted other departments at the University of Arizona to begin to develop courses on the teaching of their discipline. In some instances this type of course is also encouraged by professional associatons and societies although the University of Arizona and in particular the Graduate College is not necessarily suggesting that this is the best way to prepare graduate students for employment as teaching assistants.

In terms of foreign students, most departments indicate that they "never" or "rarely" employ foreign students as teaching assistants, and in cases where

they are used, they are seldom employed as teaching assistants during their first semester at the University. As might be expected, however, a large percentage of the teaching assistants in the College of Engineering are foreign students. In fact, fully 57 percent of the teaching assistants in this college are foreign students whose native language is not English. Similar figures can be found at other universities, for example, 48 percent of the teaching assistants in mathematics at the University of Minnesota this year are from countries where the native language is not English. This is simply a result of market conditions since American students are moving directly from a B.A. or B.S. in science to jobs that start at $25,000 to $35,000 and more foreign students are obtaining graduate degrees at American universities.

While the University has a policy that requires foreign students to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), there is no University-wide systematic evaluation of spoken English. Yet the major concern of undergraduate students regarding foreign teaching assistants deals precisely with the oral language skills of non-native speakers of English. This is a common concern among undergraduates and their parents as evidenced, for example, by a recent article published in the Chronicle of Higher Education (Sept. 11, 1985) entitled "Colleges Try Tests and Training to Make Sure Foreign TA's Can Be Understood."

Given this concern, I was interested in learning how departments assess the oral English language skills of students whose first language is not English. The most common and reportedly satisfactory method for assuring that foreign born teaching assistants are competent in English is the personal interview or

conversation with a student. Incidentally, in a recent survey of University of California, Berkeley departments the personal interview also surfaced as the most common means of assessing the English oral proficiency of foreign teaching assistants. Obviously these personal "tests" are rather subjective and can result in the assignment of students who, at least from the perspective of undergraduates, have a great deal of difficulty communicating in the English language. None of the departments included in our survey use any of the tests available such as the Test of Spoken English (TSE) and the S-P-E-A-K Test to assess the level of oral language proficiency in English. Based on a review of materials from other universities, one can conclude that this is a rather common pattern. That is, few universities require that foreign students take a test that measures oral language proficiency in English as part of the admissions criteria, and most universities leave the assessment to the individual departments.

The most elaborate and successful training program at the University of Arizona is that which is conducted by Dr. Charles Davis in the English Department. All graduate teaching assistants, whether they have teaching experience or not, are required to take a departmental training program for a full academic year. The program includes enrollment in two courses which carry credit of one unit each. A course called Preceptorship focuses on methods and strategies in teaching composition. In addition to listening to formal lectures, students are able to discuss all aspects of the teaching experience such as grading, classroom management, preparation of lectures, etc. A course entitled Colloquium emphasizes theoretical and philosophical aspects of rhetoric and composition. Here too, students are able to focus on the teaching experience. The training program also includes a full week

orientation in the fall and two full days in the spring prior to the beginning of classes. Each teaching assistant is assigned to a faculty member who acts as a supervisor. The supervisor works with the graduate teaching assistant throughout the semester and is involved in classroom visitations, both announced and unannounced, reviewing at least two sets of papers and in ongoing discussions with the teaching assistant under his/her supervision. Again, this program has been very successful at our University and others have used it as a model.

This section can be summarized as follows: Although most departments provide some type of training for graduate teaching assistants, except for a few cases, the training and supervision of graduate teaching assistants are uneven and undeveloped. The uneveness of the training programs should not concern us. Diverse kinds of training in different disciplines is quite appropriate. Training in First Aid is included for graduate teaching assistants in the Chemistry Department since they frequently serve as lab assistants, but First Aid is not relevant for teaching assistants, say, in the Social Sciences. I believe that we would agree that training for teaching assistants should be focused and directly relevant to the specific assignment and discipline.

The lack of fully developed training programs, however, needs some attention. The following section describes a plan that will soon be fully implemented at the University of Arizona in an effort to address this concern.

IV. Plan of Action

I begin this section by noting that the Arizona Board of Regents adopted a policy on graduate teaching assistants and associates at its October 1985 meeting. The policy includes three components designed to improve the selection, training and evaluation of graduate teaching assistants. The policy requires that the University of Arizona provide training in basic teaching methods and skills for all graduate teaching assistants; that regular faculty members assess the teaching performance of graduate teaching assistants, and; that foreign teaching assistants be tested for oral English proficiency.

Recognizing that employing graduate students as teaching assistants is a valuable feature of education at the University of Arizona since it is educational and provides financial support for the graduate students themselves and it is a valuable component of undergraduate instruction, we are in the process of developing a full plan of action to deal with the issue of graduate teaching assistants. Although we are in the process of finalizing this plan, much of it has already been formulated and I can report on several of its features today.

A. The University will require that all students serving as graduate teaching assistants receive training prior to being assigned teaching responsibilities. Departments will have the alternative of providing the training themselves or requiring that students participate in a workshop offered by the Office of Instructional Research and Development. Foreign teaching assistants will be required to participate in a workshop offered by the Center for English as a Second Language. This workshop will have five major components:

1. Improving overall comprehensibility.
2. Developing an awareness of cultural differences in education.
3. Providing cultural background information for the immediate environment.
4. Assessing remedial pedagogy.
5. Teaching effective pedagogic strategies.

It is our assessment that foreign students experience two different kinds of problems when they are employed as teaching assistants (Bailey, Pialorsi and Zukowski/Faust, 1984). The most obvious one, of course, has to do with proficiency in spoken English. The other which is less obvious but also very important has to do with cultural differences in education. Foreign students frequently come from systems which are very different from American higher education. Thus, in order for them to become effective teachers in our colleges and universities, they need to understand our educational culture, particularly as it relates to higher education.

B. We are developing a standardized form to be used by all departments that employ teaching assistants. This form will be used by faculty members to assess the teaching performance of each graduate teaching assistant. It is our expectation that there will be continuous feedback to the students throughout the semester so that they are able to improve their performance as necessary.

C. Foreign students whose native language is not English will be required to take the Test of Spoken English as part of their admissions to the

University of Arizona. Students not scoring satisfactorily on the TSE (cut-off scores have not yet been identified) will not be permitted to serve as teaching assistants. They will be encouraged to enroll in the appropriate courses in the Center for English as a Second Language. Other follow up activities will also be available. For example, this fall we piloted a tutoring program for foreign teaching assistants and the Department of Communications offers a course for foreign teaching assistants that includes videotaping of presentations.

V. Conclusions

While there is wide use of teaching assistants in terms of disciplines and the types of activities that they perform, most departments require their teaching assistants to participate in some form of training. The quality of the training programs, however, is quite uneven. Universities in general, and the University of Arizona in particular, need to do a better job of preparing graduate students for teaching. As others have noted, one cannot continue to assume that university teachers do not need any preparation.

Training programs for graduate assistants will have beneficial short-term and long-term results. In the short-term we will be able to provide better instructors for our undergraduate students, and in the long-term we will be able to provide better faculty for colleges and universities since many graduate students select careers as professors.

It is quite obvious that the use of graduate students as teaching assistants

will continue and that the percentage of foreign students will continue to increase in selected disciplines. The University of Arizona, I believe, will soon have a program that contributes to the development of graduate students as teachers. Upon completion of their graduate education, students should be in a position to bloom both as scholars and teachers.

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